

One Journey, Two Hearts by orphan_account

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Summary:

A worldwide epidemic has decimated the population. As far as Mike knows, he's the only one left alive in Hawkins. He decides to make a journey to the west coast. Mike isn't sure he will ever will meet anyone else. The journey is being followed from a distance by a quiet, shy girl.

1. Mike

Mike felt that there was something wrong when he walked into the house after biking home from the last day of school. He knew his parents were going to be away for the weekend. They had taken Holly along when going to New York to check out colleges with Nancy.

Mike would never be able to put his finger on it. Something just felt *off*. Like there was something in the air. He wasn't too worried about it. Nothing ever happened in Hawkins.

His friend Max, was off to California to visit her dad. So he had nobody to hang out with this weekend, and possibly not all summer. He was a little bummed, Max was fun to hang out with, the only kid his age that he was good friends with. She had even given him a little hug when saying goodbye. That had surprised the hell out of Mike. He'd gotten the idea that maybe she didn't really want to be going off to the west coast, even if it was to visit.

Tonight he was looking forward to watching some rented movies, eating junk food, and sleeping in the next day till two or three in the afternoon. He smiled to himself just thinking about it. It was going to be a glorious first day of summer vacation.

Tomorrow he would bike around...to the quarry, maybe the junkyard. He would have the whole day to himself...well the part of the day he wasn't sleeping of course.

It always seems like that night before the first day of summer vacation is the best sleep you'll ever have. No school, no homework, no projects due. No nothing.

Mike's dreams of staying up late were just that. Dreams. He'd never been able to stay up late, the night before summer vacation was no different. He fell asleep before the first movie was finished.

Nothing ever happened in Hawkins.

Except for the night Mike Wheeler had the best sleep of his life. There were sirens, there were screams. A few shots were fired. There was an air raid siren. There were cars taking off in every direction.

The power went out...and stayed out.

Mike slept through it all. When he woke up at 2 in the afternoon, he thought it was little quiet. Too quiet, something was missing. He finally figured what it was, there didn't seem to be any hum, no background noise coming from the house.

He recognized the sound, or rather lack of it. When there was a bad winter or summer storm in Hawkins, almost guaranteed the power would go out. When it did it sounded exactly like this. Eerie silence.

The VCR light that showed the power was out. He'd have to reprogram it later. Nobody else in his family knew how to do it, despite the manual with it's clear instructions.

He took his time getting upstairs. When he passed by the front door he noticed it was ajar. He was sure he'd closed it, he shrugged and was about to close it when he stopped and stepped outside.

It was quiet. No kids screaming. First day of summer vacation *always* had kids screaming while they played. He had the feeling he was being watched. It passed after a minute or so, but it was definitely there.

He waited for the occasional car to drive by. There were none.

He didn't see any cars in any driveways. Could be all his neighbours had the same idea for the first day of vacation. Except it was only summer vacation for kids. Teachers and parents still had to work. It was a Saturday, he thought there was a good chance at least one of his neighbours would be home.

Without any power he wouldn't be able to cook for himself. Not even Eggos. He'd go down to Benny's and get a burger or something. His mom had given him money to buy food the entire weekend if he wanted to.

He'd planned on ordering pizza tonight, only... if there was no power

in the entire town of Hawkins, he might not be able to....no burger at Benny's either. Shit.

It was time to scout around to see what was going on.

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If Mike was going to be honest with himself, he had admit that the first week was the hardest, he missed Holly, even Nancy...he missed his Mom's cooking. It was clear to him and Nancy that their parents were oblivious to the life of their kids. He could have had a girl living in his basement for a week and they would have never known. He knew that maybe he was too young to feel the full impact of whatever had happened. He was glad he wasn't a blubbering mess, not that anyone would have seen.

Mike had searched the entire town. He couldn't find anyone. He shouted "Hello" a good number of times and loudly, nobody ever came out of a house or a building.

Mike was truly alone.

In the first month, he raided the grocery stores for canned and dried food. He had used a grocery cart to start with. They were way too top heavy when he loaded them up, and he eventually moved to a steel Gorilla cart wagon that worked much better.

He couldn't use the stove, but barbecues, matches, propane tanks, all were in plenty of supply in Hawkins. He wouldn't starve or have to eat cold food. At least until he could figure out the farming thing.

He hit the library and grabbed books on camping, surviving in the woods and living off the land, along with books cooking, and farming. He had plenty of time to read, and not feeling like reading was going to be the same as not wanting to eat, so he was motivated.

He found oil lamps and supplies at Melvald's of all places. That store seemed to have everything from christmas lights to telephones. He'd grabbed all the batteries he could find, and a few different types of radios. There were no stations left on the air. He gave up on listening to static, he was just using up batteries he might need for something else.

In the second month, Mike knew he was going to have to prepare for winter. He wasn't too worried about food, he was pretty sure he had that covered. Heat was the real issue. There wasn't going to be any. If the Hawkins water supply held out he was ok with water. Running water had stopped weeks ago, probably some kind of automatic fail safe if there were no people maintaining the water plant...or where ever the water was being treated. He found arctic rated sleeping bags, updated winter clothes, pocket hand warmers.

He had surprised himself with how easily he was dealing without electricity. He knew he could find a generator, although he didn't want to be dependent on it. He knew that if it broke down he'd wouldn't be able to fix it, and he might not be able to find another one. No, it was just easier to live without electricity.

The oil lamps provided enough light to read by if he needed to, he'd gotten used to getting up just before the sunrise, and getting in his sleeping bag after sunset.

By the third month, Mike was prepared for riding the winter out in Hawkins. He also knew something else. His family was never coming back. He had a bad night when he became fully conscious of that fact.

What was much harder for him to come to terms with was the knowledge that he would never see Max again. They had only known each other for three years. Max was Mike's only real friend. They were never boyfriend-girlfriend by mutual agreement, and were never going to be, also by mutual agreement. They had just been really good friends. Calling them best friends, wouldn't have explained it. That didn't seem like quite enough. More like in-between best friend and girlfriend.

They never lied to each other, they told each other their worries and

their fears, and any bad things that happened to either one of them on a daily basis. They also shared their triumphs, their hobbies, and they each kept their promises.

If either one of them were having a particularly bad day, they knew they could call the other, and talk on the phone or meet up somewhere to talk. They were each other's support system. Max didn't have a good home life, so she spent very little time there if she could help it. Mike wanted to be there for her any time day or night she wanted to talk. He'd done that on several occasions, sneaking out of the house to meet her somewhere.

He couldn't remember having any fun in Hawkins without Max there with him. She he was sure she would have said the same thing if asked.

He was really going to miss her.

"Goodbye Max," Mike put his face down in his hands and cried.

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The Wheeler house didn't have a fireplace. Mike thought it would be a good idea to have firewood in case he wanted to move into a house that did. He spent the third and almost all of fourth month chopping firewood. When his axe got dull, he just went and got another one. He figured sharpening an axe or a knife might be a good skill to have, so he practiced. He began to carry around a knife also. He was never going to carry a gun, he didn't know how to use one, and he didn't want to learn how. It wasn't a useful tool. A good knife was.

His parents had never let him have one, not even for whittling. The only knife Mike knew how to use effectively was a butter knife.

He decided that using a knife as a survival tool was skill he wanted to learn. He figured he had plenty of time to learn how to use one and

how to sharpen one.

At the end of the fourth month, and a lot of firewood chopping Mike came to a conclusion. He no longer wanted to stay in Hawkins.

He would stay the winter. He was already making a list of things he would need to do to get ready for that kind of trip.

He would never know if anyone else was alive unless he traveled.

He was pretty sure nobody was coming to Hawkins to see if Mike Wheeler was still alive.

Mike was wrong.

2. Max

Mike was in a good place. Once he'd made the decision to start travelling, and started working on a detailed plan he felt focused and secure in the knowledge that he'd be making the right move. He liked living in his parent's house. It felt safe, it had been his home his entire life, and it was still his home. It would probably always feel like home.

Mike had to move on. He wanted to find out what had actually happened in Hawkins, and maybe the world, where everybody had gone to, why his parents hadn't come back.

And why Max would never come back. The thought gave Mike pause. He couldn't think about Max. That still stung a bit, would for quite a while. He would never forget her, his only real friend in Hawkins for the last three years.

Mike was in the basement doing a last bit of reading before turning out the light. The October rain outside was really coming down. The rain sounded cold. Good night to be in, Mike thought. He was finishing up a chapter in an outdoor survival book. He had some thin rope beside him, and he was practising the examples of tying more complex knots when he heard the last thing he expected to hear.

A knock on the basement door.

Mike walked cautiously to the door and put his ear to it.

"Open the door Wheeler, I know you're in there." It was a girl's voice.

"Max?" Mike whispered. It couldn't be.

Mike unlocked the door, turned the knob slowly. It was only open a crack before a figure wearing a bright yellow rain slicker pushed their way in and closed the door behind them.

"About time, Wheeler, that rain is freezing out there."

She took off her rain gear and dropped a duffel bag she had over her shoulder, and looked at him shivering a little.

Mike pointed toward the basement bathroom, "Put on some warm clothes, and crawl into the sleeping bag"

A minute later Max was in snuggled in the sleeping bag, Mike came over and unzipped the other side.

"What are you doing Wheeler?"

"I'm getting in here with you."

"You are *not*!"

"Yeah, I am Max, you're still shivering, it's cold in here even in the sleeping bag, we can share body heat...and..."

"And *what* Wheeler."

"I'm going to hug you all night long," Mike said and then burst into tears.

"Don't get me start.." Max said, and began sobbing..

"Sh-Shit, Wheeler, get in here."

Zipped up warmly they spooned in the sleeping bag. It was a long time before either one of them had stopped crying. Each wave of relief that Mike felt, spawned another crying jag and that triggered Max to do the same.

Eventually they both fell asleep.

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"How did you get here?" Mike asked.

"Drove when I could find a working car and until I ran out of gas, rode a bike if I could find a usable one, walked when I had to."

"You *walked* from California?"

"There's a reason it took me four months Wheeler."

"You're home used to be there. Why come back to Hawkins of all places?"

"Because this is where you were Mike. I had to know if you were...gone. I struggled everyday thinking I'd be coming back to a ghost town."

Max looked down... "thanks for still being here, Mike." Her bottom lip started to tremble, and Mike went over to and gave her a crushing hug.

"...can't breath....Wheeler." Mike let go.

Max felt his biceps, "What the hell happened to *you*. These things were like straws when I left, and now..."

"The last four months I've had to haul a lot of stuff around, chopping wood...you know, stuff I would have never done... before."

"I'll bet Troy wouldn't be so quick to hassle you know."

"Something tells me I'll never have to worry about him again."

"All kinds of shit changed overnight." Max said. "Remember I said I'd never kiss you unless you were the last boy on earth?"

Mike smiled. Max gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "Well... check and check. That was for still being here. Means a lot to me. You have no idea." She turned away, in order to avoid Mike's eyes.

"Don't get used to it Wheeler, you're still not my type... although I can sense my options have been reduced." Max paused, "Um....Mike?"

"Yeah, Max?" Her voice had gotten serious all of the sudden.

She turned around and gave him a tight hug trying not to cry.. "It's ok Max," Mike hugged her back, there's nobody I'd rather spend the apocalypse with."

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By the end of November. It was windy and there were signs of an early snowstorm. Mike and Max were in their separate sleeping bags with an oil lamp burning, listening to the wind.

"Was it bad out there, Max?"

"It must have been, but my dad and I missed it. We were up in the mountains in a rented cabin when it happened. My dad got sick," Max took a deep breath. "I didn't. I heard on the radio before all the stations went dead that it was an airborne virus that got up into the jetstream, spread over the entire planet in a matter of hours. They had no idea what caused it, or if there was a patient zero. Scientists are human, and just as likely to get it as anyone else. I think too many of them died before they could get a handle on it. They couldn't even tell if it could pass from person to person because it happened so fast. Once it's airborne, it doesn't make any difference."

Max described what she'd heard on the radio, that they were telling people to stay away from the big cities, but everyone flocked to them because they thought they were safer.. cities were death traps. Once you got into a city there was no quick way out. Martial law had been declared in most cities in a few hours, same with a state of emergency. It had gone downhill very fast.

"I didn't encounter anybody on my way here, and no bodies anywhere. Last radio broadcast I heard said that cities were funeral pyres. Crammed with burning bodies, buildings, no way to get out."

"I think I slept through all that," Mike said. "I'm guessing we are immune. After four or five months, I think it's probably safe."

"I thought that even if you weren't here... or... gone. I could probably survive here... seeing the glow of your lamp through the basement

window is the most incredible thing I've ever seen." Max had to stop, she was on the verge of crying again.

"Was that the first time you've ever knocked on my door?...because usually-"

"Screw you Wheeler." Max said and gave him a big smile.

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Mike no longer felt the need to travel, especially not to find anybody else, although he knew that life would be a little bit harder if they stayed in Hawkins. That was always in the back of his mind.

He didn't want to bring it up with Max. He could tell she was glad to be safe and happy to be with a friend. And really, that's all they needed for now.

One day Mike was reading up on how to navigate by stars, even though he had a couple of good compasses. "Wheeler, how can I help?"

"Help with what, Max?"

She waved her hands around, "With this whole survivalist thing. I feel like I'm taking advantage of all the work you've done."

"You don't have to Max, I'd do anything for you. You know that."

"Wheeler."

"Ok, ok, why don't you learn the things I haven't gotten around to yet?"

"And those are?..."

"You're not going to like it," Max gave him a look.

"Sewing, not just for clothes, but for leatherworking," Max started to roll her eyes, "or mechanics. Bikes *and* cars."

"Ok I'll take that one. I think I have a knack for for it anyway. My dad always said so."

"You don't want to sew my socks?" Mike gave her a smirk.

"I'll go to Melvald's and get you a new pair. I'm sure they have them."

They went to the library, trudging through the snow, to get Max books on being bike and engine repair. Mike had fitted ski's on the Gorilla cart wheels , to make it easier to get through the snow.

"Not a lot of cars around here to practice on. Looks like most of them took off that night. All the people did, I haven't seen anybody since that night. Only you."

"It's too cold to be working outside or in a garage anyway. This is going to have to wait till after winter. Leatherworking it is. Still not sewing your socks Wheeler."

Mike knew that Max would hate to admit it, but she turned out to be a natural at leatherworking. She made bracers and satchels for the both of them, a leather utility vest for Mike.

"Wow, Max, these are really good. How about some leather socks?"

"Screw you Wheeler, I told you I'm not sewing your socks. Leather or not."

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A brutal snowstorm had hit Hawkins, the wind seemed to pass through the basement like the walls weren't there.

Max had been quiet all day, and when they had finally crawled into separate sleeping bags, Mike thought she'd gone to sleep, not bothering to say goodnight.

"It must be close to Christmas," Max said quietly, "I didn't get you

anything."

"Just getting to talk to you again Max, is the best Christmas present I'll probably ever get... I, uh didn't get you anything either."

"You were here for me after four months of walking. I can't even describe how that makes me feel," Mike could hear her voice getting shaky.

"Shit Wheeler. I'm freezing, Let's zip our sleeping bags together."

"Just keep your hands to yourself Max."

"In your dreams, Wheeler."

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"I'm not freezing anymore, thanks. Maybe we need to think about some kind of external insulation for the basement."

"I think this is as cold as it's ever gotten in Hawkins" Mike was silent for a minute. "You know Max, we don't have to stay here, I mean, I'm ok with it, if you are, but we don't have to."

"Funny you should mention that Wheeler," Max continued to let Mike know what she was thinking.

3. Eleven

A month of walking.

Max and Mike walked side by side down the center of the road both of them pulling steel Gorilla carts.

They had left in early spring. In the last few weeks of winter Mike had taught Max everything he knew about living off the land. What to eat. What *not* to eat. How to tell direction using the Sun, the stars, and even the moon.

They had even tested themselves by going just outside of Hawkins and camping with no supplies except a two man tent, knife for each of them, and some wire, and a couple of lighters. If worse had come to worse, they could walk back into town and be ok. They really wanted to see if they could do it.

It turned out to be a complete success, much to Max's surprise. She couldn't believe how easy it had been, just knowing the right things to do made all the difference.

"Why don't they teach this stuff in school?" Max had complained when Mike was explaining how simple some of it was.

"There's all kinds of things they don't teach in school. Some of this Mr. Clarke hinted at, but he has a set number of things he needs to cover and that's handed down by the government or something. The library is a great place to find all this stuff.

"You made me feel a lot better about walking back to the west coast. I didn't really want to repeat the trip I had here but in the opposite direction. See, I knew you were good for something Wheeler."

"It's not like we have to camp out every night, there will be plenty of houses and motels along the way. It's only those long stretches of highway where we'll have to do that."

And so they had loaded up the carts. They were prepared to abandon them if necessary, but they didn't think their situation would ever get

that desperate where they would have to.

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"So, Wheeler, you want to tell me why you never had a girlfriend?"

"You can't have the job Max, we talked about this."

"Still not your type, I'm just curious Mike. Weren't you interested in any of the girls in school."

"That's the thing Max, doesn't make any difference how much the guy is interested, if the girl isn't, he's just wasting his time. And before you ask, you and I were friends, had we tried going out I think that would have just ruined our friendship. Whether we were each other's type or not, I didn't want to risk that, and I'm glad I didn't."

"Me too, Wheeler, I know there were some kids who couldn't wrap their head around it, but I didn't care. You're the best friend... more than best friend actually, that I've ever had. I don't regret a second of your bullshit."

Mike barked out a laugh, "Yeah goes both ways Max," and then more thoughtfully, "To answer your question, I really wasn't interested in any of the girls at our school. Too many type A's, too many drama queens. I don't know what my type is Max." He gave a her sidelong glance and smiled "Still not you though."

"Yeah, you're breakin' my heart Wheeler."

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"You know we're being followed right?"

"I know Max. I don't think we're in any danger. He's been keeping his distance."

"He? It's a she."

"I've seen the short hair through the binoculars. It's a he. Besides he's wearing clothes a guy would"

"*I'm* wearing clothes a guy would." Max said. "Anyway, I'm going to guess that's why you've been leaving food behind...it's for her."

"Yeah, he probably doesn't have the skills to live off the land like we do. I'm not sure why he doesn't just catch up and join us."

"Well, *she* is probably too scared."

"The *guy* I saw Max, didn't look scared at all, just cautious..."

Max shook her head. She turned to look back the in the direction they came from about to say something when she stumbled, fell to the ground and cried out in pain.

"Max!"

Mike got down his knees to see if she was ok. "I think I twisted my ankle. Don't think I can walk." She looked around. "Shit Wheeler, we're in the middle of nowhere."

Mike picked her up and carried to the side of the road, past the ditch to the tree line, and set her down on the soft grass, "I'll be right back." He went back to get the two carts from the middle of the road.

"Jeezus Wheeler, your arms are like steel cables, used to be you never had any upper body strength. You'll be able to carry some lucky girl across the threshold now."

"I'm not even going to ask you to try and walk on it. That will only make it worse if it's not that bad right now. It's going to hurt when I take you runner off. Count of three ok?"

Max nodded. Mike did it on "One." Max gritted her teeth but didn't cry out. He gently pulled off her sock, "Ok I'm going to touch your ankle, but I'm not going to put any pressure on it ok?" Max looked at him, her eyes trusting his. He very lightly touched her ankle at various spots. She winced in anticipation of the pressure, but she was nodding ok.

After a few minutes Mike said, "Good news, bad news. Good news is that it's not broken, it's not even sprained, very light twist, not swollen, probably not even going to bruise. I did bring some Aspirin along, will help with any internal swelling I can't see."

"Hurts like hell Wheeler, what's the bad news." Max said as she took the Aspirin.

"You probably shouldn't walk on it for a few days, so we camp here. If we need to we can double up one those Gorilla carts with the supplies, and I can pull you in one."

"Are they strong enough to take my weight?"

"Yean, they'll take something like seven or eight hundred pounds, we're ok there. That's why I got them over a Radio Flyer or some kiddie wagon."

Mike looked up at the sky. "Looks like we might be in for some rain tonight. I'm going to set up the tent. Gather some wood for a fire."

Mike had the tent set up in no time. When everything for a campfire was ready and he got it going. "I hope that guy has a tent, I think it's really going to come down tonight. It's still spring, that rain is going to be cold."

"*She* is going to be fine Wheeler."

"I'm telling you the guy I saw... was a guy."

"And I'm telling you the girl I saw was a girl. Why don't you just walk over there and get her to come over here?"

"She might run away, I'm not chasing after her her... and besides, I'm not leaving you Max."

XXXXXX

Mike kept the fire going when they got into the tent, he figured the rain would put it out soon enough. It didn't take long for either of them to fall asleep with the sound of the wind and rain against the tent.

"Wheeler," Max hissed in Mike's ear. "I think there's someone outside."

Mike was awake in an instant, grabbed his flashlight and carefully slid out of the sleeping bag. "Whoever it is is going to be expecting me to come out slowly." Mike whispered, "I'm not going to do that. I'm going out fast and loud. Stay inside. Take the knife, hold it out in front of you, pointy end out front. If someone rushes in, they'll get a surprise."

Mike was out in a flash yelling, pointing the flashlight with a full beam out in front of him.

He caught the face of a girl with very short hair. She was his age, wide eyed, really scared, completely soaked by driving rain and shivering uncontrollably.

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Mike managed to get her inside the tent after some coaxing. It was meant for 3 adults, so the three of them fit in it with a lot of room to spare.

The girl was almost quaking with how badly she was shivering.

"Max, get her into some dry clothes, and zip the sleeping bags together."

"Got it Wheeler," Max said and Mike turned around to give them some privacy.

After a few minutes of cloth rustling, and the sound of a zipper working its way around, Max finally said, "We're in Wheeler. She's like ice, what's your plan?"

"She's between us, behind me, in front of you. Get friendly close, we need to prevent her from getting hypothermia." Mike crawled into one side of the sleeping bag..

The girl pressed close up against his back, Max wasn't kidding, she was cold as ice. He felt a bit of a chill as she shivered against his back and legs. He could almost feel her teeth chattering behind his head.

"How are you doing Max?"

"My ankle is throbbing, and now I'm cold."

"I don't remember you being this much of a whiner, Max."

"Screw you Wheeler."

Mike kept them in the same position for about an hour, doubling the time since the girl's shivering had stopped.

They were all at a temperature that would be let them sleep comfortably. Mike could tell by Max's breathing that she was asleep, and he was about to drop off himself when he heard, "Thank you," in a small voice.

"You're welcome. You're safe, get some sleep, we can talk in the morning."

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When Mike woke up in the morning he saw Max was out of the sleeping bag, she was looking at him with her eyebrows raised and

giving him a smirk. She gave a nod to towards the girl.

The girl was snuggled up to him with her head on his chest and arms around his waist. Mike looked up at Max and mouthed "help!"

Max cleared her throat with exaggerated loudness.

The girl stirred and opened her eyes. Oh. Her eyes took Mike's breath away. When the girl saw how close to Mike she'd been sleeping, she quickly scooted away, said "Sorry," and got out of the sleeping bag her face becoming very flushed..

"It's ok. How are you feeling? Can I see your hand?"

She hesitated but held out her hand to Mike. Mike took it gently and felt the the base of her thumb.

"Are checking her pulse, Wheeler?"

"Weak pulse is a sign of hyphothermia. Along with shivering. Just trying to making sure, we can't tell if she has slurred speech or not."

Mike saw the tattoo. 011.

4. Lucas

011.

She quickly pulled her hand away.

"Shit." Mike said.

"What is it Wheeler?"

"She has a tattoo. Zero One One. I'm guessing that's not going to be a good thing. It's going to be really messed up."

He looked at the girl, "Can you tell me what the tattoo is for?"

She looked at him with those eyes, and pointed to herself.

Mike had been afraid of that. "I think her name... is Eleven." He looked at her for confirmation. She seemed very embarrassed, looked down and nodded her head.

"Ok, that's Max, short for Maxine but nobody calls her that, I'm Mike short for Michael, but only my....mom called me that." Mike took a breath.

"Um, we can call you El? Short for Eleven?"

The girl looked at him then at Max, and back to Mike again, she gave them both a small smile and nodded.

"El, meet Max. Max is my friend. We're on our way to the west coast." He looked at Max, "it's ok if she tags along Max? she would have ended up there anyway if she'd followed us."

El held out her hand for Max to shake.

"Are you kidding me?" Max said, "no way I'm shaking your hand. She crawled over to El and gave her a tight hug.

"Friends?" El asked Max.

"You bet your ass we're friends. Except for Wheeler here I didn't have any. I'm not about to start turning them down now."

El looked at Mike. Mike looked back, lost in her eyes.

Several seconds later Max said, "Mike, you guys are staring at each other."

Both El and Mike looked down and said, "Sorry" at the same time. Both had the outline of a smile.

"Mike, I need to use the ladies restroom."

"Did you forget how?"

"Don't be a mouthbreather Wheeler. You told me I shouldn't walk on this ankle, and...I can't believe I'm going to do this but I need your help, I really have to go."

"I will help." It was El. She unzipped the tent and crawled outside, she turned around, held her hand out for Max.

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Max and El made their way a few dozen feet behind the tent farther into the tree line. It was awkward, but El did a good job of allowing Max to hop on one foot and keep her from stepping with the other foot.

"Are you with Mike?" El said quietly.

Max was confused, and said "What do you...oh am I *with* Mike. No, no, we are just really good friends."

"You sleep in the same tent. The same sleeping bag."

Max blushed, "That was for you. We have separate sleeping bags, wait... do you... like him?"

El turned crimson, and looked down nodding.

Of course she did, Max thought, El had been following Mike for a month, never mind that Max was there too. Who knows how long she'd actually been watching him when he went in and out of his house. Probably too scared to approach him.

"You know he may not feel the same way about you... right?"

El was still looking down... nodded.

When they had gotten back to the camp, Mike had a big fire going, and was hanging up El's clothes on makeshift hangers to dry them out.

"Uh, sorry I had to handle your, um, ah, frilly things" Mike turned red.

Max looked at El who had a matching shade going. She rolled her eyes. "That's what it's like to do laundry Mike, welcome to our world."

"So Wheeler, new sleeping arrangements. El and I in the same tent, you in the spare."

Mike was about to agree when he saw the pleading look on El's face. "I get nightmares," she said.

"Last night was the first night I didn't."

"Max how about a compromise? Um, same tent separate sleeping bags?"

They gathered up more firewood. Mike and El did most of the work to allow Max to stay off her feet.

They were a few dozen yards away from camp when Mike felt like he was being watched. He looked at El, "I feel it too," she said. They made their way back to the camp and a brisk walk.

"We're being watched, " Max said as soon as Mike and El returned.

"Yeah," probably by that guy I was telling you about."

Max looked at him sharply, "I thought you were talking about El?"

"I know the difference between a random guy and a pretty girl..." As soon as he said it he blushed. He couldn't even look at El.

Max rolled her eyes.

"El, do you know who he is?" Mike asked.

"No."

"We sit by the campfire and wait for him to make himself known. We need to wait for Max's ankle anyway. We aren't in any rush."

That night they were in their separate sleeping bags, Max and El had gone to sleep hours ago. Mike was still awake listening to their breathing and for any noises outside. He heard a sniffing and then someone trying to be quiet while crying.

"Nightmare, El?"

"Yes."

"It's ok, El, get in my sleeping bag if it will help."

Without a word, she got out of hers, and slipped in beside Mike. Her arm was around his waist, head on his chest and she was sleeping soundly within seconds.

How am I going to deal with this? Mike thought. *What the hell was Max going to think?*

XXXXXX

"You have a problem, Wheeler."

"Tell me about it."

"You can't lead her on, if you aren't interested you have to let her know. As soon as possible."

"I'm not leading her on, Max."

"Wheeler, she spent the last two nights in your sleeping bag, practically wrapped around you. That's not quite sending the right signal."

Mike sighed, "How did I get lucky enough to have girl problems with one of the last two girls in a thousand miles."

"Do you like her?"

"I don't know her Max. I mean, I don't know if she's even... stable? I hate to say it, but we don't know anything about her. I don't want to create... a problem for any of us."

"You better figure something out. It's going to get awkward."

"It's already awkward, she wasn't in your sleeping bag. You and I are ok, though, right Max?"

"We're always going to be ok, Wheeler. Doesn't make any difference to me how bad you screw up, or screw *this* up, " she said referring to El, "but we have a friendship that you don't walk away from because one of us can't get his shit together. Oops, did I say that out loud? Fix it Wheeler, El deserves to know one way or the other."

Shit, Mike thought. he had no idea how to handle this. *You can't feel anything for someone you just met this soon can you?* El is obviously comfortable around him... maybe a little too much. Mike didn't have a lot of experience with girls... ok, none. Max didn't count, they never had that kind of relationship.

"She's been out there for awhile, can you go check on her, I'll build a another fire."

XXXXXX

Max found El gathering more firewood.

"I waited." El said to Max.

"Something on your mind, El?"

"I need to tell you about my nightmares... why I have them."

Max thought of herself as a pretty tough cookie. Only Mike had ever seen her cry, and she'd always managed to make a smartass comment to try and cover up her feelings, and recover quickly.

When El recounted the last few years of her life, something *unlatched* inside of Max. She began sobbing to the point of hyperventilating.

When El hugged her and told her everything was ok now that she didn't need to cry. Max dropped to her knees unable to stand on one leg anymore. This girl didn't just *have* nightmares, she had lived a nightmare, and she was comforting Max? How resilient did your spirit have to be to survive that and still show kindness towards others? Max was unable to grasp even a basic understanding of it. El hugged her until she had stopped crying. She was amazing. Mike should be so lucky.

It was some time before they returned back to camp, El was holding Max up letting her lean on her when they walked.

Mike had the fire going. He saw they had more firewood and nodded to them both, "Thanks."

He noticed Max was...*different*. Something was off in her demeanor.

"You doing ok Max?"

"I'm fine Mike."

Mike? Not *Wheeler*. Something was definitely off...

"I have... a... gun pointed at you!"

The voice was from across the road. "Turn around and put your hand in the air."

Mike whispered to Max and El, "Get behind me, lay on the ground, hide behind me."

Mike turned around and shouted , "No!"

"Just put your hands in the air then." The voice said again, Mike guessed it was someone his age.

"No!" Mike shouted again.

"I have a gun pointed at you!" The voice sounded more than a little unconvinced this time.

"Then shoot *it* instead of shooting off your mouth or better yet, don't be a little asshole and come on over here."

"Shit." Mike heard the voice, lower, across the street, and smiled. His suspicion was confirmed. No gun was pointed at him or anywhere in sight.

"Ok, just don't stab me with that knife of yours once I get over there."

Mike was right, as the guy made his way across the highway Mike could see he was no older than any of them. Mike sat down between Max and El, "You guys ok?"

"That was a little risky wasn't it Mike?" Max said.

Hmm, *Mike* again. He'd have to talk to her alone to find out what was going on. "Only if he had a gun."

"How did you know he didn't?"

"He hesitated on saying he had a gun pointed at us... like he was pointing something else."

"Welcome to our little party," Mike said as the guy sat down opposite the campfire from them. He took a longer look at Max than was necessary. It immediately put Mike on the defensive.

"You gonna tell us your name? It's the least you could do after pointing a gun at us."

The guy was clearly embarrassed, "Yeah man, sorry about that, I think I've watched too many movies. I'm Lucas Sinclair."

5. The Golden Rule

Well, that's Max Mayfield," Mike pointed to Max, "that's...El..."

"Hopper," El finished for him.

Mike nodded, "and I'm Mike Wheeler. We've all come from Hawkins"

"Ok that's a coincidence, my family was going to move there after my dad got out of the army. It kept getting put off. And then this happened. I'm making my way there now."

"It's cold in the winter time, it's one of the reasons Max and I left." Mike said.

"You two are... together?" Lucas said raising his eyebrows.

"No, only good friends."

"Oh, you and... El then?"

"Uh, um, no. El, uh, joined us after we had started off." He could see that El was looking down avoiding everyone's eyes.

Shit, Mike thought. He could tell Lucas was fishing, trying to figure where everybody fit in to the group. And Mike was beginning to question himself... and Max. "Where are you camped?"

"About half a mile up the highway," Lucas gestured toward the direction they had been travelling.

"I was actually coming back here to tell you that you can't travel in that direction anymore."

"And why not?"

"Why don't you guys walk up that far and help me bring my stuff back. You'll see. A picture is worth a thousand words and all that."

It took a few minutes for Max, Mike and El, to pack up their duffel bags, "We're ready."

"It's only half a mile, you didn't need to pack anything." Lucas looked at the three of them.

"It's called *being prepared*. At least we have clothes and some supplies if we never make it back. These days anybody could point a gun at you." Mike smirked at Lucas.

"I'm never gonna live that down am I?"

They walked in pairs up the road to where Lucas said he was camped. Lucas and El took the lead and Max and Mike a few dozen feet behind.

When they had about as much privacy as they were going to get for a serious conversation, Mike asked, "What's going on Max... you are acting different."

"When I first met you Mike, I was... broken. Not a good home life, I had nothing to look forward to, not school, not friends. Nothing... And then I met you. My whole life changed, I had a friend, you didn't judge me, you didn't want any kind of relationship, you just wanted a friend... and what did I do? I treated you like shit pretty much every minute we were together.... I'm sorry Mike."

Max started to sniff, and Mike pulled her into a hug, "I love you Mike."

Mike was nonplussed, "Max, what did we talk about? This isn't supposed to happen."

"Not like that Mike, it's still not going to happen... as a friend, just really really good friend,"

"But..." Max wiped her eyes, "I wasn't broken like El is broken. *Nobody* should have to go through what she did. So even if nothing ever happens between you two, just be kind to her, that's the very least she deserves. And you won't hear another word from me if you let her into your sleeping bag with you. I would offer mine if I thought it would help. You gave her more peace that one night than she's had in years."

"For the record, Max. You've never been shitty to me. Are you

quirky? Sure, that's why I like you, one of the reasons we are friends. We were there for each other. The world ended and you're here, *still* my friend," Mike cleared his throat. "That's not going to change anytime soon."

XXXXX

"They are hugging." Lucas said to El as he took a quick glance back to see how far behind Max and Mike were.

"She's crying. It looks like, he just broke up with her. I thought Mike said they were only good friends?"

El looked back a little wide eyed. "They are. Max told me she wasn't with him."

"Are you sure?" Lucas said.

"No." El said looking down. Lucas could see she was crushed. She had the look of someone who had not only found out some bad news about a friend, but that she had found it out from the betrayal of another friend.

Lucas didn't even know her and he thought it was a shitty thing for them to do.

XXXXX

"Jeezus, Lucas what's that smell?" Max said scrunching up her face.

"That's the smell of a dying city that's burning to the ground." They could see multiple columns of smoke rising in the distance.

"It's getting worse, it didn't smell this bad when I set up camp a few

days ago. I've been a lot closer, you can't see through the smoke, and the smell is unbearable. I'll bet it's not good for you to be breathing it in either."

"Ok, let's get Lucas packed up and head back up. Maybe we should move our camp farther back tomorrow morning." Mike said.

XXXXX

"I'll stay with Max tonight," El said, "You have the spare tent?"

"Ok, El... if you have a nightmare?" Mike pulled out the tent bag from the cart for El.

"I'll be with Max, I'll be ok." El was looking down being very business like when setting up the tent not giving Mike a further look. She moved her sleeping bag from Mike's tent to the newly set up one for her and Max.

Max raised her eyebrows at Mike and shrugged when El wasn't looking.

Shit, thought Mike. What did he do wrong? Did he take too long showing any interest? Did he even *have* any interest? The thought of not being able to look into El's eyes again wrenched painfully at his heart. Yeah, he decided, he did. He had a *lot* of interest. Ok, it was more than interest... it was more than like. It was *way* more than like. He felt lost and amazed, thinking of the different ways she smiled at him. The way she looked at him with those eyes. And now it looked like he was too late. He'd taken too long, busy with the whole end of the world thing. He was sure El had liked him and he thought he could wait until he was really sure. He wanted to avoid making a fool of himself. He thought... if he waited a little bit longer... But who knows, maybe it *was* just a nightmare comfort thing? It's not like girls at school had ever been tripping over themselves trying to get first in line to be Mike Wheeler's girlfriend. Some things never change. Maybe they could be friends when she no longer gave him the cold

shoulder. That wasn't going to be today though. Probably not tomorrow either. Mike sighed, it was just like being in school again.

Lucas looked back and forth between everybody, he didn't know what was going on, but he had a good idea. It looked super complicated and he didn't want to get in the middle of it. Especially if Mike and Max were a thing. That would really suck, but he wasn't surprised. At least he had people to talk to now, he hadn't talked to another living person in almost a year.

He managed to catch Max's eye and she gave him a *I don't know what's going on* look.

XXXXX

El went to their tent first. She hadn't said a word since declaring the new sleeping arrangements. Lucas, Max and Mike sat around the campfire.

"El saw you two hugging," Lucas said, matter-of-factly in a low voice. Mike could barely hear him above the crackling of the fire. Lucas was poking a stick around the edge of a large piece of firewood.

"We hug all the time," Mike said defensively.

"Yeah, but has *she* seen you hugging... *all the time* ... just sayin"

"Shit." Mike and Max said at the same time.

XXXXX

They left the fire going again that night. Everyone crawled into their

respective tents.

Max could see El's tear stained cheeks when she had gotten in her sleeping bag and looked over at her.

"El," Max began.

"You lied to me," El said heartbroken.

"I didn't lie, El. Mike and I...", she could see fresh tears spilling out of El's eyes, "We have an important rule we follow. Friends Don't Lie."

"Mike is my friend, but you are too El. I would *never* lie to Mike or to you. Never. Friends Don't Lie. It's as simple as that."

"But you hugged Mike?"

"We hug all the time. Sometimes good friends do that. And I've been in the same sleeping bag with him too, for warmth, just like we did the other night. We're just friends, El. If everyone had a friend like Mike, believe me the world would have been a much better place. Mike has been a better friend to me than I have to him. But he never complained, because he didn't think that way. He's always been there for me. Somehow I knew he would be after walking for months back to Hawkins. And I was right, he was there for me." Max wiped her eyes sniffing.

"El," Max looked at her, "I'm not *with* him." She was quiet for a moment.

"I'll tell you a secret though..." Max said looking towards the sound of the campfire and said in a hushed conspiratorial voice. "I think I like Lucas."

Max gave El a low giggle, just saying it out loud made her feel happy and giddy at the same time.

El got very wide eyed and gave Max a smile that would have overpowered the morning sun.

XXXXXX

El was up early. Max heard El wake up from another nightmare. She was crying but she didn't go to Mike's tent. She was probably feeling guilty that she'd ignored him last night.

It sounded like El was trying to get the fire going. In a few minutes Max could hear the fire crackling. Max was about to drift off again when she heard a loud "Mike?!"

A few seconds later, El was scrambling into their tent. "Mike is sick... I think Lucas is too."

Max's heart raced. "Oh no!" Mike was supposed to be immune, like she was...

Max felt bad for El, she knew El really liked Mike, and couldn't lose him not without having at least a chance to be together to start with. It wasn't fair.

"No, no, no, no,no." Max couldn't lose Mike either, not after all they had been through together.

6. Eleven Nightingale

"I've seen this before." El said to Max.

"We have to keep them warm. They will have a fever, but they will be cold most of the time."

"Won't you get it?" Max asked El, worried. She did not want to be alone again if it all went to hell.

"I've already had it. I'll be ok, I'm getting into Mike's sleeping bag. You will have to... get in there with Lucas. I hope that's ok, it's the only way. Or.." El looked back at Mike's tent, "...we can switch and you can keep Mike warm, and I'll take Lucas."

"No you stay with Mike... for how long? What if we don't keep them warm? I'm scared, El," Max said, she tried to disguise how worried she was. She knew she hadn't succeeded when El came over and hugged her. Max was way out of her element, Mike had always taken care of basic survival details even though he had taught her a lot.

"If we don't keep them warm, they will be... gone. Everything will be ok as long as we keep them warm."

El split up the food and water between the two of them, and said to Max, "Keep him warm."

El entered Mike's tent, zipped closed and got into the sleeping bag with Mike. He was already shivering..."C-cold" Mike managed to say.

"I'll keep you warm Mike," El said into his ear. "I'll keep you warm." She zipped the sleeping bag all way way, up, and scooted up next time him making contact with her entire body. She flushed thinking about being this close to Mike. She knew that now as no time for feeling shy, Mike had to be kept warm. It was well into the night before his shivering stopped.

She knew the fever was next. She hoped Max and Lucas were ok in their tent.

"You have beautiful eyes." Mike said. El knew he was delirious now,

still, she could feel the heat radiating off her face.

Mike began to ramble. "I can't even look at you without being lost in your eyes. You have beautiful eyes. Has anybody ever told you that? You should be told that everyday. It's like I've loved you for a thousand years and I'd recognize those eyes anywhere in time. Those are the eyes of a flawless spirit. I'm sorry I took so long. I took way too long, even when I *knew*. I didn't mean to take that long El. Don't give up on me. I don't want to lose you. I've lost too many people already. I'm just afraid to lose you too."

"You won't lose me, Mike. You never have to be afraid of losing me. I promise."

Mike had continued on for at least another hour. He told her he loved her. A few times. A dozen times. Closer to a hundred times. El had to stop herself from crying each time. She told him she loved him too, each time. The fever was reaching its peak and she was sure that Mike didn't know or mean what he was saying, it was the fever talking. El was sure. She didn't want to believe it was only the fever talking. She wanted to believe that some of Mike was getting through and letting her know of his true feelings. But she knew it was the fever. She also knew that she meant what she herself had said. Each and every time.

"Even if you don't remember Mike, know that I love you." She held him tight. She fell asleep with her head on his shoulder, tears still in her eyes.

There were no nightmares.

XXXXX

"Thirsty..." Mike managed to croak out.

El was ready and quickly screwed off the cap of his canteen, and held his head up so he could drink.

"I need to sit up." El helped him sit up in his sleeping bag. His hair was a mess. A gorgeous mess, El thought.

"Uh, I smell."

"I like your smell." Mike sniffed himself, "Ugh, not this you don't."

"Mike... I've been next to it all night. I like your smell." She looked into his eyes. Mike looked back, nodded and smiled.

"I, um, said some things when I was... uh, last night."

"It's ok Mike, that particular fever will do that." El looked down.

"No, you don't understand, El. I *knew* what I was saying. The fever just let me say it without hesitation or sounding like I was a total wastoid. And I meant it, El. Every. Single. Word."

"Oh... Mike..." El leaned into him and gave him a unyielding hug. "I did too Mike."

Mike hugged her back. "Thanks El, I think you saved my life."

He pulled back, looked into her eyes and tapped his fist over his heart, "You definitely saved this. I know I'm not that old but I didn't realize how long it's been hollow. I guess I've been waiting for the right girl to take possession... it's all yours El."

El patted her own heart. "Mine has been yours for over a year."

Mike paused for a second and looked back and forth between El's eyes, "Wow," he said and leaned in, kissed El softly. "Thank you, El... can't even..."

He took her hand and pressed it against his chest. El could feel his heart pounding. She looked at his eyes in wonder, her own eyes big and round. She took his hand and pressed it to her own thumping heart. "Same, Mike."

They sat like that for few minutes, not saying a word. No words were required. Their eyes and their beating hearts told each other everything their souls wanted to know.

Mike drew in a deep breath, gave El another kiss. "We should see if Lucas... and Max are ok."

Mike helped El out of the tent, and looked at her, "It's been really quiet over there." El looked a little worried.

Mike unzipped the tent slowly, quietly, trying not to make any noise. He peeked in, a little scared at what he might see.

El saw him pull his head out fast.

"What's wrong?" El's eyes had gone very wide.

Mike was red faced. "They're kissing." He whispered. "Um, let's give them a few minutes."

El smiled at Mike and nodded. She helped Mike build another fire.

A few minutes turned out to be almost forty-five minutes. Eventually Max and Lucas came out of the tent and sat by the fire. They were holding hands.

That didn't go unnoticed by either Mike or El. Mike's hand had found hers when they first sat side by side opposite Lucas's tent. Neither of them had let go while they waited. He squeezed her hand tight. El squeezed back without looking at him.

"So," Lucas said, "I think Max saved my life last night... what about you guys?"

Mike looked Lucas in the eye. "El saved me."

Lucas nodded back, "I know exactly what you mean." Mike had no way of knowing but Lucas had squeezed Max's hand.

"Mike, can I ask you a question?" Lucas said and thumbed behind him towards the burning city. Nobody could see it, but everyone knew what Lucas was referring to.

"What are we doing?"

"I thought I would try and make a better life for Max and I. It's no

longer about the two of us... don't get me wrong, I would die for Max. No questions asked."

El smiled at him, then at Max.

Mike looked at El, she nodded for him to continue . "But I would die for El now too, in extreme pain if I knew it would save her... do you know what I mean Lucas?"

Lucas nodded. "I know what you mean... what do you want to do?"

"I want to go back to Hawkins." Mike looked between El and Max, then down at his feet.

Max and El looked at each other. A slight imperceptible nod was exchanged between them.

"We go back," Max said.

"To Hawkins." El finished.

7. To Hawkins

They loaded up the carts, Mike suggesting that for a few days Lucas pull Max in one of the carts. They managed to make it as comfortable as possible for her. Mike said it would only be for a few days, until Max could walk without pain.

The first day, Max tried to stand on her foot, she had an arm around Mike and Lucas, and El stood in front offering encouragement.

She was able to walk for about half an hour and then back on the cart. After a few days of that schedule, Max was able to walk the entire day.

Lucas was relieved, and Mike was super relieved. There was no way they could have done anything if she had required surgery.

One day El and Max were farther ahead for "girl talk". Max had told the guys talk baseball or something.

"Mike," Lucas said.

Mike could tell something was on his mind.

"Um, I know we don't know each other very well. Everything I know about you I learned from Max."

"Is there a problem?" Mike asked giving Lucas a sidelong glance.

"You and Max weren't a thing where you? She talks about you all the time. You are her hero, you know that? It's tough competition."

"We aren't competing for Max, Lucas. Max and I are just really good friends. You aren't the first to ask this, even before civilization did it's disappearing act. Both of us constantly fielded questions about our relationship." Mike laughed.

"You will never have a better friend than Max, Lucas. And if you are more than a friend to her, well, Max deserves to be happy. I was never going to be that kind of friend to Max."

"I want to be the kind of friend to her, that you are. Your a hard guy to follow Mike. I can't believe you didn't have a ton of friends."

Lucas looked at Mike taking in everything he was saying.

"I have three friends now. The count is going up. World had to end before it happened... I'm ok with that. I have El now. I'd wait through five world endings for her."

Mike could see Max walking back towards he and Lucas.

"Switch it up, Mike, your girl needs to talk to you." Mike gave Lucas and Max a big smile and jogged up to where El was walking.

Mike caught up beside her and their hands found each other.

"Lucas seemed worried, back there." El said.

"He was a little worried that Max and I still had something going on."

"Still?"

"Yeah, that's just it, we never did. He could be a little jealous of the friendship we have, it's a close one, but- wait... El, you don't think Max and I were together right?"

"No, Mike, Max made sure I understood a few weeks ago. He's not the only one who was jealous. I know that you are a really good friends with her. Lucas wants to be too, I can tell."

"Yeah, he said that to me while we were talking. Um, El?"

"Yes, Mike?"

"I need to kiss you." Mike leaned in and kissed her. "I love you El."

El put her hand over her heart, a little breathless and nodded.

The could hear Max yelling from back behind them, "Get a tent."

XXXXXX

"Uh, Mike?" Lucas said, "Looks like we're coming up on a town, I'm going to scout ahead, I'm quick on my feet so I can go out fast enough and be back again before you guys walk too far. I'll only be half an hour, an hour tops."

"I'm coming with you," Max said.

"Not on that ankle you're not." Lucas say. Max didn't question his determined look.

"You come back to me Lucas Sinclair, or I'm going to pissed."

Neither Mike or El could hide their smile. "You heard her, Lucas."

It was almost an three hours before they could see three figures in this distance farther down the highway.

Max was practically in tears. She barely managed to say, "I hope one of those is Lucas."

When it was obvious that one of the figures was Lucas, Max ran to him crying.

After a few minutes, they were all standing together, Max was holding on to Lucas's arm. No indication she would let go anytime soon.

Lucas said, "Meet Dustin Henderson and his girlfriend Suzie."

There was a round of shaking hands. "Where are you walking from?" Mike asked Dustin.

"A place I moved to last year near the end of the school... called Hawkins. Suzie was visiting from Utah, got stuck here when the apocalypse shut down the buses."

Everyone else looked at each other.

"Except for Lucas, we're from Hawkins, we all agreed to head back. You're welcome to join us." Mike looked back the way they came.

"You can't really keep on this road, burning city back there, you need to take an alternate route."

"Shit. We'll find a new route. I have maps and a compass. Suzie and I found last winter in Hawkins brutal. Don't want to do that again."

"If you change your mind, you know where to find us."

They said their goodbyes, and each party continue on in opposite directions.

They walked side by side. "Too bad they didn't want to go back," Lucas said

"If he was new to Hawkins, he doesn't really have any roots there."

Lucas asked the group, "do you think we should have tried a little harder to persuade them to stick with us. It's lonely on the road."

"He has Suzie," Mike said. "That might be all he needs", he looked at El who smiled back.

The sun was getting low on the horizon and they all thought it would be a good time to set up camp. They found a thick group of trees off the side of the highway, that would keep them out of sight in case there was anyone passing by. They had no reason to start watching in shifts, but they hadn't expected to run into two more people today either.

They sat around the campfire in comfortable silence. Max was holding on to Lucas. Mike had his arm around El's waist.

"This is peaceful," Lucas said quietly.

There were no sirens. No big city noises. No small town noises. Nothing. It wasn't warm enough yet for the sound of crickets.

"Mmm." Mike agreed. A few minutes later. "I've never been able to stay up late.. I think I'm done for the day..."

El immediately stirred ready to head back to their tent.

The sleeping arrangements had changed. Max and Lucas in his tent, and El stayed with Mike. Mike remembered telling Max that he didn't care if they used two or one sleeping bags, but El would be in his sleeping bag so they didn't need to feel guilty if they wanted to be closer. Nobody had any issue with changes.

El was snuggled up against Mike, her head on his shoulder. He had his arms around her. "Does it bother you that Dustin and Suzie didn't want to join us?" She asked.

"A little," Mike said, "I would have thought they'd want the extra company or new friends. I think they were about the same age as us, so it's not like we wouldn't have had anything in common."

"Maybe Suzie has more influence on him. Some guys will do anything for their girl," El said squeezing his waist.

"You could be right, I know I would, " Mike squeezed her back. "I'm following you around now El, wherever you want to go."

"We go back home. We can deal with the winter."

A few minutes later, Mike felt something hot and wet on his neck. El sniffed.

"You ok, El?" Mike said immediately concerned.

"Tears of joy, Mike. I'm happier than I've ever been in my entire life. I can't believe I'm with you."

Mike squeezed her tighter. "Me too, El. I miss the conveniences of civilization a little bit, but I'd give that up for this," he kissed the top of her forehead, "Any day." El snuggled up a little closer and gave him a contented sigh. They fell asleep that way.

XXXXX

"Uh, Mike, can you and El come out here." Was the first thing Mike

heard in the morning.

He couldn't hear any warnings in Lucas voice, so he wasn't too worried.

Mike crawled out of the tent with El a few seconds behind him.

Lucas and Max were sitting by the campfire across from Dustin and Suzie.

Mike raised his eyebrows.

"We didn't get very far. Suzie wanted to go back. We both wanted friends, so here we are."

El went over and hugged both of them.

"Strength in numbers." Lucas said to Dustin.

"I think we can make it to Hawkins by sunset," Mike said.

All told it had taken them a little over month to walk back to Hawkins. The sun was just setting when they hit the outskirts of town.

"Oh, oh." Mike said halting everyone in their tracks.

"What's wrong?" Lucas said.

"The lights are on."

8. False Alarm

Notes for the Chapter:

Finally an update. :)

“Ok, this is what we do.” Mike said to the group.

“We wait a few hours, Lucas, Dustin, and I go in and scout around.”

“No.”

It was Max.

“What do you mean *no* , Max?”

“Did you forget what I was like when I thought Lucas wasn’t coming back?”

Mike looked down.

“Exactly. So. No. Do you want to put El through that.”

“Mike?” He could see her lips start to tremble and he went over to hug her. She whispered in his ear.

“Please don’t leave me Mike.”

Mike hugged her tighter.

Everyone gave them a moment. Finally he turned around, “Ok new plan. We camp out right here. We *all* go into town after sun up.”

“Not at night?” Suzie said.

“They, assuming there is a *they* would be expecting that. We waltz right in during the day. We’ll be able to see sunlight reflecting off of binoculars, or,” he looked at Lucas, “a gun barrel or something.”

Lucas threw up his hands. “I *knew* you wouldn’t forget.”

“What’s that about?” Dustin said.

“Nothing. Mike’s just being a little asshole. I can call you and asshole right? We’re friends enough for that.” Lucas smiled back at him.

“We are a party, we stick together. Strength in numbers isn’t just a saying. Max was right. El wouldn’t just lose me... I... I would lose her too. I love her and I can’t lose her.”

El squeezed his hand and smiled at the rest.

“But we *should* , keep watch.”

“I’ll take the first shift,” Max said. She went over to Mike and hugged him, “Thanks Mike.”

XXXXX

In the morning they packed up. “We leave our stuff here” Mike said.

“Why?” Lucas said.

“If we have to run out of town, we have supplies waiting for us right here. If not, we pick up new supplies in town.

Lucas shrugged, “Makes sense.”

They started the walk into town. Mike put on sunglasses.

“Are those serving a purpose Mike? Or are you just trying to look dorky. Those are cheap sunglasses.”

“And do you know what cheap sunglasses *don’t* have?”

“Enlighten us,” Dustin said.

“Well, no polarization, which means they don’t cut glare.”

Lucas rolled his eyes, “Like glare off of gun barrels.”

Mike smiled, "See even Lucas gets it."

"You're an asshole, Mike." Max said smiling, "But you're an asshole that's keeping us alive, so you get a pass on that one."

"Have you guys ever heard of a peacock spider?" Mike asked.

"It's a species of jumping spider." Dustin answered.

"Right, and like all spiders it has eight eyes. You also might know that spiders eyes don't move like humans and other animals."

"That's why they have eight. Each one has a field of vision."

"Exactly," Mike said.

"Ok, that was fun info. Why tell us that?" Lucas said.

"Mike wants us collectively to be a spider. That means each of us takes a particular view. Max looks straight ahead, El looks behind, Mike takes one side, Lucas the other, I double check each field of view every few seconds."

"Your girlfriend is very smart Dustin," Mike said smiling handing Lucas a pair of cheap sunglasses.

Dustin grinned at him, "And she's taken."

Nobody saw El's secret smile. It was Mike's idea. Mike's *smart* idea. He was keeping them safe. He was keeping *her* safe. Only one other person had kept her safe. Her dad was gone now, but Mike had filled the gap in her heart. She squeezed his hand and again while he talked. He gave her a quick sidelong glance and smile. And squeezed back.

They kept the *spider formation* through the walk into town.

They saw nothing. No people, no sunlight reflecting off of binoculars, or off of gun barrels.

Nothing.

The sun was starting to set, revealing which lights were on and which were off.

“Ok, it looks like the other end of town where the mall is.” Mike said.

XXXXX

It was nice and cool in the mall. It had full power, all the lights were on *and* all the air conditioning.

“This is a big mall, there’s no way it should be powered up right now.” Mike said.

“Unless it’s being powered by the lab. Remember the lab is supposed to be run by the Department of Energy.” Max said.

“Ok, maybe, but why is it powered up now?” Mike said.

“I think it was *always* powered up. We just didn’t notice it because you can’t really see the light when you are in town. Definitely not from where you live Mike.”

“Hmm, good point. Um, guys why don’t we set up in the mall? Plenty of supplies, plenty of hiding places if we need to. We’ll search for rooms on the second level. Always keeping an eye out for escape routes.”

“Works for me.” Dustin said.

“Ok then, sorry about the false alarm,” Mike said, “I was just trying to keep us safe.”

“You don’t need to say sorry,” El said. She’d been quiet for the entire walk. “Not for keeping us safe. Keeping *me* safe.”

Mike smiled at her, leaned over and kissed her. On the mouth. So

that everyone could see. She smiled shyly and looked down.

Max did the same thing to Lucas. Dustin followed suit with Suzie.

“I’d like to propose kind of a new rule.” Mike said looking at the others.

“What’s that?” Lucas said.

“If we feel the need to go wandering around the mall, or even outside, we only do it in pairs. I mean our couple pairs. None of us wants us to lose our partners. They are hard to come by these days. Um, I don’t want to be out of El’s sight. I can’t...”

They all nodded their heads enthusiastically. El’s arm was around Mike’s waist and she squeezed him hard. Mike knew this rule would be easy for them to follow.

XXXXX

“Mike? Bathroom?” El’s big eyes looked at Mike.

“Sure, El it’s just around the corner.”

She continued to look at him, her eyes still with the question, “I need you to... be close.”

“Right.” Mike they got out of their sleeping bags. “Um, El, you’re legs are beautiful, but you should put on some track pants or something.”

She smiled her thanks, nodded and pulled on a pair of pants in front of him, he got a brief glimpse of her underwear, felt himself flush and looked away. They walked towards the bathroom.

“Um, El, do you want me outside the bathroom or insi-”

“Inside Mike.” She could see Mike was red, she kissed him on the

cheek. "I never had privacy. You are more embarrassed than I am, Mike, don't cry, it's ok." She hugged him. "It's ok."

Mike was sure her childhood was much worse than she'd ever let on.

When she was finished. She left the stall, "Are you ok?"

Mike's face was so red he felt like blood would start leaking from his eyes.

She stood in front of him and looked into his eyes. He tried to avoid her gaze.

"Mike. Look at me."

It was the hardest thing Mike ever had to do. She turned her face up to him, closed her eyes and kissed him. She stood back, and looked at him, the trust in her eyes let Mike know her feelings for him mirrored his own for her.

"Mike, I understand."

9. Icestorm

They stayed at the mall. They were comfortable and safe but they still took precautions.

“Remember guys, *everyone* wears a backpack, If for some reason we need to get out of here we meet at our designated place, but there is enough food and supplies in the pack to keep you warm-ish, and safe. You share body heat, that’s the only way it will work.”

“What if we get separated?” Lucas asked.

“Don’t get separated. I’m not going anywhere without El by my side. Anywhere. Get it?” Mike was being overly harsh but he was trying to get his point across. But to ease the tension he felt had increased in the group he continued.

“Lucas, I can ‘t stay in the same sleeping bag as Max again. Her feet are too cold.” Everyone laughed except for Max.

“Screw you Wheeler. You’ll be begging for my body heat if it happens.”

XXXXXX

They sat around the table at the food court in the mall. They were eating a meal that Dustin, Suzie, and El had cooked.

“For the most part this is just fast food, but it’s tasty. We’ll need energy for our travels.” Dustin said.

“Where are we going?” Max said.

“We aren’t going anywhere, Max. But there’s a storm coming in. We

are going want to shovel out a path for every entrance.” Mike said.

“There’s a storm coming in? Did I miss the latest weather report?” Lucas said.

Dustin said, “When did you become a weatherman?”

“It’s not hard to predict the weather.” Mike said.

“Then why couldn’t weather guys get it right?” Max said.

“They were relying too much on weather models. Anyway it’s a myth they couldn’t get the weather right. That’s the kind of meme thing that just snowballs.”

“Ok, Bill Nye, how do you predict the weather.” Max was already rolling her eyes.

“Guys, I just want you to know that Max walked back from California to Hawkins to be with me. She’s not stupid, and I love her to death... you know what I mean, El.” El smiled at him nodding with understanding eyes.

“But, sometimes she just comes out with stuff she no longer remembers. Max we went over this. You can predict the weather with a good to excellent degree of accuracy by observation. In this case, clouds, barometric pressure and wind direction.”

“Ok, how do you know what the clouds will do?” Dustin asked.

“Wind direction, if you have cirrus clouds, you know the thin wispy ones high in the sky, with tails and a steady wind northeast-east to south t here’s chance of rain or snow, depending on season in twenty to thirty hours. West Northwest to North winds mean fair weather.”

“It’s that easy?” Lucas said.

“Changes with types, barometric pressure, but yeah.” Mike said.

“Ok, so you memorize cloud types, and you can get wind direction if you have a compass. But what about barometric pressure? You carrying one of those around Mike?” Max smirked.

Mike reached into his bag, and pulled out his portable barometer, a rugged looking handheld model.

“What if you run out of batteries?” Max said not quite convinced.

“It’s a barometer, atmospheric pressure is the only energy it needs. It’s like a thermometer, it doesn’t need batteries either.”

“I’ve seen plenty of thermometers that need batteries.” Max said.

“Sure, digital ones, analog ones don’t.” Mike said.

Suzie spoke up at this point, “I for one appreciate Mike’s survival skills. Is he over cautious? Yes, but we are sitting here in a comfortable, well lit and warm mall because of him. Don’t listen to them Mike, El and I know you have our best interests in mind.”

XXXXX

“Uh, Mike?” Dustin said when the group of them were at the front doors of the mall. “What’s happening out there.”

“Freezing rain.”

“Isn’t that just a fancy phrase for hail?”

“No, it falls as rain, but it freezes as soon as it hits something solid.”

“Is it dangerous?” El asked.

“If there’s a lot of accretion, it can break branches, bring down powerlines, collapse entire transmission towers.”

“Are we going to lose power here?” Suzie asked.

“I think this mall is self contained and that’s why it’s been running so long after the disaster. Outside will be one big rink though, let’s go get some walking poles from the sports store.”

XXXXX

"I'm a little worried, Mike." Suzie said to him.

"It's not really problem, Suzie." We could stay here for years and not step outside."

"Are you sure?" Suzie looked worried.

"It's a bad icestorm for sure. I'm not worried."

"We're taking your lead here Mike." Max said, "We are all pretty worried."

"Even if trees collapse, none can touch the mall, it's surrounded by parking lots. I've been thinking, once it stops with the freezing rain, we all go out skating."

El looked down, "I can't skate."

"We will teach you," the rest said at the same time.

That's exactly what they did. El she turned out to be very graceful. Mike was awkward at first, Max was a natural, the other guys had initial problems too, but nobody took to it like El did.

They were exhausted by the end of the day.

"I can't believe we were able to skate all the way to your house Mike and back again." Max said panting.

"That was fun!" El said also panting. She had skated home with Mike holding hands.

"I didn't think I'd ever get to skate again," Max said, sounding a little melancholy.

"You skated like you'd been doing it for years." Lucas told her.

"I used to be pretty good on a skateboard. I guess it's like riding a bike."

"A bike?" El said.

"We'll teach you to ride a bike as soon as the snow's gone." Mike said. He stood up from taking her skates off and gave her a warm kiss. Let's wrap it up here, we are going to get more rain. I think this is going to worse than the last time."

They gathered up their gear quickly and headed back inside the mall.

Lucas and Mike made sure the doors were secure and they went back to the respective domestic areas.

They could hear the wind howling outside even from the relatively isolated area they were at in the mall.

"Let's get some walkie talkies and get them all on the same frequency." Mike said.

"Even in the mall?" Lucas said.

"*Especially* in the mall. We'll test them out and make sure we can all communicate with each other. Ok?" Mike looked around.

He saw some frowns and some puzzles faces. "You don't want to?" He asked.

"Isn't this overkill?" Lucas said.

"No it isn't." Max said.

"Look, I don't want to be an asshole but if you guys don't like stuff I'm doing, let me know ok?"

"It's not that Mike." Max said. "Believe me, I know you are trying to keep us safe. I'm not going to speak for everyone, but I think you are making us feel... like mouthbreathers, like we don't know anything."

El linked her arm around Mike in support.

“Ok. I’m selfish. I have more friends than I ever did before. Including a girlfriend. He turned to smile at El. Her big eyes smiled back. “I don’t want to lose you guys, not over something stupid, something I could have prevented.”

Dustin held up his hands. “Don’t say anything more Mike. Suzie and I get it, Max you have to convince your boyfriend.”

“C’mom.” Max pulled Lucas up and they walked off to the area where they made house.

Just then a loud whistling wind could be heard and El said. “I’m cold.”

It was plenty warm in the mall, but Mike took her back to their sleeping bag. They got in and snuggled.

“You are always nice and warm Mike. I like sleeping beside you.”

“Me too. Um... El, do you think I’m being overprotective of everyone?”

“You can overprotect me all you want. I would be... lost without you. You are just being a good friend Mike. They will all see that once they think about it overnight.”

Mike turned to her and kissed her. They kissed for a few minutes and to Mike’s surprise, El deepened her kiss.

Mike pulled back, “Um, El...”

“Don’t you like it when I kiss you that way?”

“I do El. I really do, but it has certain...”

“Mike... I want... I’ve been talking to Max... I want to be more... intimidating to you.”

“Intimate.”

“Yes. Intimate... do you know how?”

“I do El, this has to be all your decision.”

“I’m ready Mike. I have told her things you don’t know. Girl things.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t need a condo. I... was operated on when I was younger.”

Mike got her meaning. He was thankful she couldn't see his blushing in the dark. “Ok, El, but this would be my first time. I might not do it right.”

“Did Max not show you how?”

Mike gave her a quiet laugh. “We weren’t that kind of friends El. You should only do this with someone love very much.”

“I love you very much, Mike.”

10. Leaving

Mike was rearranging the items in his backpack when Max came up and knelt beside him.

“Hey Max, what’s up?” He looked around, “Where’s El?”

“She’s gone shopping with Suzie.”

He did a double take when he saw that Max looked like she’d been crying. She said, “El wants to leave.”

Just then, her radio crackled and Mike her Lucas’ voice “Need to talk to you Max...”

Max got up and said, “Be right back.”

Mike was caught off guard, and the lead weight in the pit of his stomach started to get heavier. *El wants to leave?* Mike hadn’t even considered the possibility. He’d assumed that they’d be together for the rest of their lives. He felt responsible for her, for the whole group actually.

He would be alone. The thought sent him spiraling into a depression he knew would take a long time to get out of. She’d been a little moody, and quiet lately, probably afraid to tell him, and got Max to do it. If that was the case, he would probably never see her again, if she was getting ready to leave.

“I’m going to be a fifth wheel.” Mike hung his head.

“You ok Mike?”

It was El. She knelt beside him where Max had been a moment ago. Mike did his second double take of the day. He looked into her eyes and said, “Wow, El, you look really pretty... did you...”

And that was it, he had to look away, the tears dropping from his eyes would have blinded him anyway.

“Mike?! What’s going on?”

“...M-Max said you wanted to leave. I thought...,” Mike gave a huge sigh, “I thought we’d be together forever.”

“We *will* be Mike. I promised you wouldn’t lose me.”

“But...?”

“I can’t stay here Mike.” She looked around at the mall. “It reminds me too much of the lab. I... I *can’t* stay here any longer.”

“The lab?”

“I will tell you tonight... promise.”

“Ok... we’ve had it good here,” Mike said, “but it’s going to make us soft, and that’s not good. “If you’re with me, I can be anywhere.”

She smiled at him. “I know... but the others don’t want to leave.”

“A Group meeting is needed.”

XXXXXX

“You just want to leave because *El* can’t stay here.”

“That’s right Lucas, that’s exactly why I want to leave. But there is another reason.”

“We’re getting complacent.” Suzie said.

“Have I mentioned that your girlfriend is really smart Dustin?”

“Have I mentioned that she’s already taken Mike?” Dustin gave him a toothy grin.

“Suzie is right. We had no challenges other than the ice storm a few weeks ago. Bottom line for me is that El wants to leave. We’ll stay at my house. I can’t make the decision for everyone...”

“Why don’t we just go someplace warmer?” Max said.

“Are you suggesting California?”

“Not where I used to live, there are better places than that.”

“Ok, let me do some research. El and I are leaving right away. She’s uncomfortable here. I’d like us all to be together. You already know that life on the road is tough. I can’t ask you to do that again. During the worst of it, Max walked from California to Hawkins to find me... just sayin’.” He smiled at the group.

“If Max goes where you go, I go where Max goes.”

“Do you know where you were going to live when you moved here?” Mike asked Lucas.

“Somewhere on Maple Street. It’s a cul-de-sac.”

“Oh, good! I lived on that street. We were probably going to be neighbors.”

“Suzie and I could pick a house next to one of you. I’m not tied to the house my mom and I moved into.”

“Um, ok, this will give us all privacy but keep us close for radio contact. I think t we pack up and leave right now.”

They all nodded. That had gone much easier than Mike thought it would.

XXXXX

Mike wiped his eyes. “I really thought you wanted to leave me. I didn’t know what I was going to do.”

They were walking ahead of everyone else, snow crunching under their boots, both their hands held tightly in one mitten.

“Mike...” El said gently, “I am *never* going to leave you. I have found someone who loves me. I had no one until my dad rescued me... after he was... gone I thought I’d be alone forever. If you and Max hadn’t... accepted me...”

Mike squeezed her hand. “Remember there’s no power at my house. It will be cold.”

“I was never warm at the mall, only when I was in the sleeping bag with you.” She smiled at him. “That isn’t going to change is it?”

Mike looked at her, “No, we have be together like that for... medical reasons.”

El giggled. “Yes, medical reasons.”

“El... um... I thought you were really pretty already... but you look uh... prettier today...? Or am I just feeling needy right now?”

“Thank you Mike. It’s ok if you need me Mike. I need you. It feels very good to be needed... Suzie put on a little eyeliner for me. Says it brings out my eyes.”

“You’ve always had beautiful eyes. But now I just want to look into them all the time.”

“I... I took some makeup from the store... is that ok?”

“It’s the world we live in now, El. Everything is free. Up to now we’ve only been taking stuff we need to survive. Nobody is going to complain if you take make-up from a store.”

“I was scared to do it.”

“It’s ok El, really... here we are...”

Mike went to the basement door, let El in, closed it up, locking it behind him.

“I’m cold.” Mike could see she was shivering.

“I’ll get the sleeping bags ready, we can get in and snuggle. That will warm you up.”

XXXXXX

“You smell nice.”

“It’s... per-perfume.”

“Very... um... sexy...”

“Oh? You think so? Hmm, I wonder if I did that on purpose?”

XXXXXX

“Now I know what Max was trying to explain. That was very nice Mike. Can we do it again?”

“Um, tonight El. I need some recovery time.”

“Tonight then. I need to tell you about the lab. Max already knows, but... I don’t want you to... not love me anymore...”

“That won’t happen El. I want to be with you forever.”

“Me too.”

XXXXXX

El felt bad. Mike had started to cry right near the beginning of her story. She hugged him until he quieted down, and then continued. Her story was going to get worse, she started to doubt that Mike would be able to handle everything that had happened to her.

When her story got really bad, and he started crying again, El was crying with him. "It's ok Mike... I have you now."

"It's not ok, El. Nobody should have to go through that. I can't believe you... came out... ok..."

"I'm not really ok Mike. What makes it easier is having friends. What makes it... *good* ... is having you. You love me. I watched a lot of TV, all girls wanted to have a boy that loved them. I've wanted that since then. I wanted someone who loves me for a long time. My dad loved me, and that was good, but I needed... someone like you. I was scared to tell you at first. I didn't want you to think I was a weirdo. This hair didn't help." She ran her hand over her hair. I can't believe you think I'm pretty. I'm so lucky." Mike hugged her tight, she stared to shiver. "I'm getting cold again."

"Let's get our pajamas on and get back into the sleeping bag."

They were back in the sleeping bag. Mike held El in his arms, her head on his shoulder.

"Whatever you want to do or where you want to go, Mike. As long as I'm with you, I'll be happy and feel safe."

He hugged her tighter. "Let's go to where it's warmer, we can try farming. We'll go to the library tomorrow."

"I don't know how find books in a library."

"Ah, I will teach you the Dewey Decimal system. Every time you can find a book for me, you'll get a kiss... uh, well, even if you don't"

"I will be a fast learner." El kissed his cheek and dropped off to sleep with a smile on her face.

11. The Library

“I’m ready to go.”

Mike looked up from his backpack. El was wearing a blue print dress, and her eyes seemed even bigger and prettier than he’d ever seen them.

He pressed his lips together, stood up and walked over to her. He gave her a warm hug.

“Is everything ok Mike?”

“I don’t pay enough attention to you. Here I am with literally the prettiest girl in the world and I’ve been neglecting you.”

“Mike... you’ve been busy, we all know that.”

“I should never be too busy for you.”

“I’ve never been tired, really cold, or hungry with you Mike. And I’ve never been happier. You have done everything right. A girl couldn’t ask for a better boyfriend, even before all this happened,”

“Thanks El.”

“I mean it.”

Mike gave her a kiss on the mouth, not deep, but he held it for a long time. “I love you El.”

“I love your kisses. I’m going to stick around for those ok?” She giggled.

“You really do look pretty today. Why are you dressed up? Your legs are going to be cold on the walk to the library.”

“I have leggings underneath. I wanted to dress up for our library date. It’s a date right?” She smiled at him.

“Yes it is. Remember no talking in the library.”

“Ok... but our kissing might be loud.”

Mike laughed. “Yes I forgot, library kisses are the best. Just a warning.”

XXXXXX

They were halfway to the library and the wind started to pick up. “Are we going to get another storm?” El said, looking worried.

“It looks like it. But don’t worry, I’ve got us covered.”

El looked even more worried, when the snow started. “Mike... what if we get stuck here.”

He stopped and turned to look at her before they entered the building. “El, I promise. I will keep you warm, safe, and happy. I knew this might be a possibility. I have a surprise for you inside.”

She looked relieved when she heard the word *promise* , but she still looked around.

Once inside they kicked the snow off their boots.

“It’s warm in here!” El said, smiling. “That was your surprise? Is this place like the mall?”

“No, it’s even better than that. This building has a natural gas boiler system with radiators for heating. No power is needed. We don’t want to walk back and forth to the library, I’m not sure I can do all the research and planning I want to do for us in one day... so even if there wasn’t going to be a storm outside, we are going to stay here overnight.”

“Overnight? Is it safe?” El looked down, “Of course it’s safe. You promised.”

“That’s right. Follow me.”

He led her to the back of the library where there were sound isolated reading rooms. He opened the door to one and El walked into what looked like a mini apartment. An air mattress on the floor with a comfy looking sleeping bag on it. A sofa, one one wall and a writing desk on the opposite wall. The back wall was one big bookshelf.

“When I was alone after this all happened I did a lot of survival research, I learned new skills.”

“Even the boring ones?” Her eyes wide as she looked at the shelf.

“Definitely. And *especially* the boring ones. I knew they would keep me alive.”

They took off their winter gear and threw it on the sofa.

“Oh, one thing I forgot to do.” He walked up to El and put his hands on her waist. She immediately closed her eyes and turned her face up to his and put her arms around his neck. He kissed her for a long time, and then hugged her for even longer.

El sighed, “Warm, safe, and happy.”

“I have food for a week, but I don’t think we’ll be here more than one night. I guess that depends on the storm.”

XXXXX

“What’s wrong Mike?”

“I want to ask you a question, before we get started, but I don’t want you to get mad at me, and I don’t want you to feel bad.”

“I don’t think I could ever get mad at you.”

“Can you count ok?” Mike instantly regretted asking her when she hung her head.

“I’m not really good at math, but I can count. My dad concentrated on my speaking skills, and simple math. I’m *not* stupid.”

Mike had her in his arms before she could finish. “I’m sorry El. I will teach you everything I know. It can be a lot, but there will be no test.” He grinned.

XXXXX

“Oh! So if one book was 917.123 and another was 917.124, but you needed to file a book between the two, it would be 917.1235?”

“Yes, I mean, librarians who know the system better than I do might tell you that based on the last name of the author it could be .1231 or .1236, but you have the basic idea. That’s really good, El I know people who were in my class that didn’t grasp that concept. I mean, that really deserves a long kiss.”

El was breathless when they parted. “With those kinds of kisses, I can be a very fast learner.”

“I have a few atlases here. I’ll show you how to use the card catalog, no power, so no microfiches.

XXXXX

Mike used the conference table in the reading room next to the one he had set up for sleeping. He had maps spread out all over the large table. He heard El come up to him breathless. “I found them!”

Her enthusiasm alone put a smile on his face. “There was a whole

shelf full of them, wasn't there... um, let me think... 403 right?"

She nodded, "I found them myself. Mike..."

"What is it El?"

"I could learn a lot here. I could learn everything there is to know."
She said it in almost a whisper.

"You could... what are you trying to tell me?"

"It's warm in here... and there are all these books... and... could we just live here until it's time to go?"

Mike looked surprised. "I never thought of that. Yes we could. There's a lot more room to move around here than there was at my house. We probably have at least four months of cold weather left this winter. Maybe longer. This is Hawkins."

No sooner had he said that than the wind started to howl outside. Both he and El shivered at the same time. "That really sounds cold. We are losing light anyway. We've already eaten... we should try and get some sleep and start when it gets light tomorrow morning."

As they crawled into the sleeping bag, El got very quiet and asked. "Did you and Max sleep in this together?"

"No, I used the sofa, I let her have the sleeping bag."

She was happy with that answer and curled up beside him. They both listened to the wind and the snow hitting the windows.

The radio crackled, "Mike are you there? This is Lucas. Over."

Mike grabbed the radio and thumbed the push to talk button. "Everything ok Lucas? Over."

"Max wanted me to check in to see if guys were out of this storm. We can't hear it very well in the mall unless we go to one of the entrances, but it looks pretty bad.... Over."

"We are safe, warm..." He gave El a little squeeze in his arm. "... and

happy. Over.”

“Uh, do you want to talk to Max? Over.”

“She’s your problem now, Lucas, over.”

As Lucas laughed, Mike and El could hear Max in the background, “I heard that Wheeler...”

“Ok, just checking in,” Lucas said. “Over and out.”

“We have good friends.” El said.

“Yeah... but, El. I don’t think they’ll come with us. I know Max had it pretty bad when she was walking back to Hawkins, so the safety and comfort of the mall is a big draw for her and Lucas. I think if we hit Dustin and Suzie with the logic, they might.. I don’t know what to do.”

“Do you want to stay Mike?”

“No, it doesn’t make any sense to stay. Anyway, I don’t need to see the rest of the country, but I know you’ll see some beautiful places along the way.”

“You’ve already seen the world?”

“No, but I’ve seen the most beautiful thing I’m ever going to. I get to kiss her anytime I want.”

“I don't think I'm beautiful... but... I will accept all your kisses.” El snuggled closer.

They kissed until they both fell asleep.

12. 99 Problems

Notes for the Chapter:

Subject matter little on the nasty side. Some violence.

Mike and El were walking hand in hand. Loaded down with the essentials they needed for travel.

“Mike, the backpack is rubbing on my shoulder.” They were standing in the middle of the road. She turned to Mike, looked up at him.

He made some adjustments to her straps, “The belt strap came loose, it let things move around too much.” He cinched it up tighter. Her eyes smiled at him.

Mike smiled back, “You know when you smile at me like that I just have to kiss you.” He leaned forward, and gave her a soft kiss. It lasted longer than he intended but, it was worth it.

XXXXX

“Mike? Where are they?” El was close to tears when they couldn’t find them at the mall.

“All of their stuff is there... like they just went to check out some other part of the mall. We left notes of our plans everywhere we used to hang out in the mall. We couldn’t wait any longer. I hate that we had to leave, but my first priority is you. I’ll miss Max but she has Lucas now, and Max is a survivor. I taught both of you everything I know, and you both know how to find information if you need it in a library.”

“Do you think we’ll ever see them again?”

Mike slowly shook his head. "No. It's ok though, we were both alone for a long time before we found each other. I love you more than I ever thought possible. If it's just us two. I'm good." He kissed her again.

Their fingers interlaced and they continued walking down the road.

XXXXXX

"Pretty."

El was looking at all the lights down the road, it wasn't quite dark yet, but the sun had dropped below the horizon

Mike started to hear the rumble. "Shit. Quick El, get into the tree line for cover. Shit. I hope they didn't see us."

"What's wrong?"

"Bikers. Had to be at least a hundred lights. Shit. This is going to be bad."

"Bad men on bicycles?"

"Motorcycles, and the worst form of human that can be created. I watched a documentary on them once, it was late at night and I was bored. Bikers will go on about freedom of the road, personal lifestyle, whatever bullshit they can say to make it seem like they just want to live free. Living free means no job. So what do they do for money? Prostitution, drugs, kill other bikers for *their* money and drugs. They are the more disgusting thing mankind had to offer. They will do depraved things for fun."

"Will they hurt us?"

"Worse El."

“Kill us?”

“That’s the best we can hope for. Shit. I don’t know what to do.”

The rumble got louder and El put her hand over her ears. “Maybe they didn’t see us?”

She saw a tear running down Mike’s face. He shook his head sadly.

The rumbling got to its peak, and then quickly trailed off. They had turned off their engines.

“I know you’re in there bitch. If I have to go in and get you it won’t go well for you.”

El saw the saddest thing she was ever going to see. The look of sick desperation in Mike’s eyes. At first she thought she would cry.

But then she got mad.

“Do you trust me Mike?”

He nodded slowly. He was shutting down and he knew it.

She grabbed his hand, “Let’s go meet them and give them a choice.”

XXXXX

“Looke here boys! Fresh meat, and two of them. Gonna be a party tonight.” He called over his shoulder, “Hey Ped, I think they’re at the age you like’em.”

Mike saw El’s fierce brown eyes. He got his knives ready. He could easily take two or three of them out. Or El. He could do that... if he had to.

“Leave or die.” El said simply.

“Whoa boys, didja hear that? We got ourselves a choice. You know what sweet thing? I think I can speak for all my compadres here. We’ll die, cause we ain’t leavin’.”

“I was hoping you’d said that.” She tilted her head forward.

Mike watched every single biker and their rides as they shot up into the air. Fast. So high that the light glinting off the silver frames of the motorcycles winked out one by one as he lost sight of them.

“Get back.” El said. They both retreated to the tree line.

Mike saw silver sparkles again as the bikes and the little black dots that had been riding them came down, getting bigger. Fast again.

They all hit the ground within a second of each other. The gas tanks ruptured, the sparks ignited the fuel. None of the explosions killed the bikers though. It was the sudden stop of a hundred and twenty mile an hour journey straight down towards the asphalt highway that had done that.

XXXXX

“Do you still love me?” El said, unable to meet Mike’s eyes.

“Of course El. You saved my life. You know you forgot to put on your superhero costume before you did that.”

“It doesn’t bother you that I just killed a hundred people?”

“They weren’t people El. They were scum, and you just scraped them off the bottom of our shoes. Look at me El.”

El looked at him as they sat cross legged from each other in the tent. "You don't need to explain. It was the lab. That's ok. I would have killed for you El. No questions asked. I love you."

"Thank you, Mike. I would do anything for you."

"Then you'll accept this gift." Mike unzipped a compartment in his backpack. He handed her a brush.

El frowned, "I was being serious Mike, that's not really funny. That brush is useless to me, and took up valuable space in your backpack."

"Hmm," Mike said, "It looks like I might have wasted more space by adding this."

He handed her a hand mirror. "It goes with the brush."

El looked at her face in the mirror, her eyes turned to saucers as she saw her hair. "I have pixie hair! It's growing!"

She put down the brush and mirror, and threw her arms around Mike. She kissed his entire face over and over.

"I didn't make your hair grow El, but I've been watching it."

"I'm going to grow it to my feet..." She looked down, "If I can."

"Even if you can't. I will still kiss you every morning and every night. Um... El?"

"Yes Mike?"

"Thanks for saving my life. I've never been so scared in my life. Not even when I thought I'd be alone for all of it."

Mike was done. His tears started, and then El's did.

They both cried themselves to sleep in each other's arms.

13. Ten Years Later

Notes for the Chapter:

I have no more story. So I tried for a clean ending. Will never be Earth Abides, but that was my inspiration.

I have another post-apocalyptic story in mind. Probably not as long though.

El was curled up against Mike on the swinging porch bench. It was cool and a storm threatened, but they had a blanket covering them.

El's hair was long enough to be considered an unstyled lob. She loved it.

Mike told her that she'd gone beyond pretty. That there really weren't any words for how she looked or how he felt about her.

"Time to haul that old fridge away. How long have you been meaning to do that?"

"Couple of years anyway." Mike smiled at her.

"I think we might be having that ant problem again." El said.

"Geez, all they are missing is a leader. Do you think it might be the pie you made?"

"I might have dropped a piece of apple."

"Yeah, I'll help you look. Tomorrow though. I feel way too peaceful to even move right now."

“Me too.” She gave a soft giggle.

XXXXX

Mike had picked this street in Berkeley California. Mainly for it's view of the Golden Gate bridge. El had approved. Watching the sunset was the highlight of their day

They had a garden that took up a lot of their time. They made trips to hardware stores.

XXXXX

“I'd recognize that hair anywhere.” Mike said.

“It's down to her knees! She's beautiful!” El said.

“I'm sure Lucas thinks so too.”

They watched as Max, Lucas, Dustin and Suzie walked towards them along San Lupo Drive.

Max pointed at them. All four ran towards them.

Mike gave Max a quick kiss on the lips and hugged her for a long time rocking bath and forth. Both El and Lucas gave them their time.

“El! Your hair!” Max gave her kiss on the cheek and a long hug.

XXXXX

“Sorry El. You know I don’t swear, but guys? Where the fuck were you?”

“We were exploring the mall,” Suzie said.

“We found a secret elevator at one of the loading rooms for supplies.”

“Mike, long story short. We all went down the elevator.”

“Ok... for ten years?” Mike looked back and forth to his friends.

“Door locked after we got down. There was a whole underground complex, I think it might be connected to the lab, anyway we needed the combination to get back up.”

“Ouch. How many combinations?” The geek part of Mike asked the question.

“Six digits.” Suzie said.

Mike thought for a few seconds. “Ok, the math isn’t quite working here.”

“Every three wrong guesses, you wait ten minutes.” Dustin said.

“We split up our time, broke it in half, first half from zero up and from the middle down, second half from last down, and middle up. We had to eat sleep. Whole complex down there. We explored. So long story short, took us about nine and half years. Rest was travelling.”

Mike nodded. He went over and hugged Max again. All of them. He went back to El, hugged her. He whispered into her ear. “That’s what friends do El. Never forget that.”

She cried and hugged him back.

“Your directions are shit Mike.” Dustin said. “If we hadn’t had a final address or street, we’d have been screwed. Took us about two months to walk here.”

“We had to take detours, I thought of leaving signs for the detours, but I didn’t want anyone *else* finding their way here. You know what I mean?”

They all nodded. “Especially if they had guns... right Lucas?”

“Seriously Mike? That was ten years ago.” Lucas threw up his hands, but he was smiling.

Mike ran his forearm over his eyes, but he couldn’t hide his crying. El came over and hugged him. “It’s ok Mike. Our friends are here now.”

XXXXX

“So... “ Mike said. “El and I live here.” He pointed to the house behind them, rent’s cheap on this street, so you can pick any house. If you don’t like the furnishings, well I guess it depends on how much work you want to put into switching them... um, you don’t need to live on this street...”

“Why do you live on this street?”

“Lucas...” Max sounded exasperated, “...look.”

They all turned towards the west, the sunset over the Golden Gate bridge was its own answer.

“We watch it every night... with coffee.” El said smiling at her friends.

“You have coffee!” Max looked envious.

“And beef jerky. Closest thing you are going to get to meat these days. Tons of each.” Mike said.

XXXXX

They all sat around a homemade fire pit later that night. Max was the first to notice. “El? Is that... a ring?”

She held up her hand, “Black Titanium, we found a jewelry job along the way, picked out our sizes, and then got married on the rock. Once we got here.”

“Rock?” Suzie asked.

“Indian Rock Park. We climbed up the west side, professed our love to each other. We were married.” Max noted El's speech and vocabulary. Mike had really helped her.

Mike nodded he was having a hard time holding in his emotions.

Max didn't bother. She was crying when she said, “That's beautiful. You'll have to show us.”

Mike winked a Lucas, Dustin caught the wink also.

Both Lucas and Dustin both sighed.

Notes for the Chapter:

For those of you still reading my stories.

If you could pick an El from one of my stories, and pair her with a different Mike from another story. What would be your suggestions?